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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 000126

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA'S SCHOOL LEAVING EXAM RESULTS  
DISAPPOINT AGAIN

REF: PRETORIA 000070

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. For the sixth year in a row, South Africa's national pass rates for its public school-leaving exams, the matric, have declined to just over 60 percent, down from 62.5 percent in 2008. (NOTE: The matric is a term commonly used to refer to the final year of high school and the qualification received on graduating from high school. It also refers to the minimum university entrance requirements. END NOTE) More disturbing are statistics that show that only 35 percent of the cohort who began their schooling in 1998 and should have graduated this year took the exam, meaning approximately 65 percent of them did not receive a high school diploma. No one in the SAG is sugar-coating the results; most of the blame has been put on ill-prepared or undedicated teachers. Education Minister Angie Motshekga insists her ministry is working on halting the decline, but flaws within South Africa's education system are systemic and worsening. END SUMMARY.

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OVERVIEW  
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¶2. (SBU) For the sixth year in a row, pass rates for South Africa's public school-leaving exam, called the matric, have declined. In 2009, just over 60 percent of students who sat for the exam passed, compared to just over 70 percent in ¶2004. In real terms, this means 217,331 of the 551,940 who sat for the exam this year failed. The number of pupils who received a 30 percent mark or higher for physical science plunged to 38.6 percent in 2009 from 54.9 in 2008, while the figure for mathematics stayed at 46 percent, the Education Ministry said. However, it should be noted that constant changes to the curricula and to the matric to improve the quality of education make it difficult to compare results from year to year. (NOTE: The 2009 matric results by race are not yet available, but in 2008, 57 percent of black matriculants passed, compared to 99 percent of white matriculants. While the Department of Education does not include results by race in any official reports, press articles report that results are once again characterized by a striking dearth of black pupils among the country's top achievers, as the majority of those who achieved multiple distinctions (high scores in more than one subject) were white. END NOTE)

¶3. (SBU) On the good news front, the sheer number of students

going through the education system and completing high school has been steadily increasing since the apartheid years. Over 18,000 more students took the exam in 2009 than in 2008, and almost 20 percent of these 551,940 students received high enough marks to automatically qualify for entry into university, a slight improvement over the 18 percent who qualified last year. Two of South Africa's nine provinces improved scores: KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape, by 3.5 percent and 0.4 percent, respectively. Despite an overall decline in the pass rate, some 417 schools achieved a 100 percent pass rate, including 23 quintile one schools, meaning they are under-resourced schools in the highest poverty ranking. Also, the number of schools with a lower than 20 percent pass rate declined.

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THE HIDDEN NUMBERS GIVE PERSPECTIVE  
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14. (SBU) Of the 1,550,790 students who entered grade one in Q4. (SBU) Of the 1,550,790 students who entered grade one in 1998, just over 551,490 took the matric this year, with the remaining having dropped out somewhere along the way. This means of the cohort that should have graduated from high school this year, only 35 percent took the exam, and only 21 percent received a high school diploma. "It's not six in ten that are passing matric, but six in ten who are not getting an education at all," according to the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD). These drop-out figures are consistent with CEPD's data from 1995 and 1997 cohorts as well. If current trends continue, CEPD believes dropouts from this generation will make up the majority of all middle-aged adults in the country in 30 years, the amount of time they believe it will take South Africa to right its education system.

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15. (SBU) Moreover, not all of the 109,697 matriculants who received scores high enough to qualify for university admission will be accepted to university. The deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, Adam Habib, warns that universities are full and that the government has not adequately funded the expansion of higher education to permit everyone qualifying for university to attend.

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WHO'S TO BLAME? APPARENTLY EVERYONE  
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16. (SBU) After revealing the disappointing results, Education Minister Angie Motshekga said, "saying we are unhappy is too mild - we've had sleepless nights and agonized," and that "bad teachers" should shoulder much of the blame. President Jacob Zuma, who has no formal education, added that "the government is serious about non-negotiables...teachers must be on time, in class and teaching for seven hours each day." Chief Executive of the Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools, Paul Coditz, said, "too many teachers lack commitment and have become despondent because they aren't appreciated by the community or government and no longer consider teaching a noble profession." USAID officials note that pupil and teacher absenteeism, plus ill discipline and late registration of pupils every year are also factors. Press reports also note that many parents are uneducated and unable to help their children with homework, or feel too intimidated to challenge poorly performing teachers.

17. (SBU) Predictably, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union refuted Motshekga's claims, laying more blame on the government. They argue that teachers have not been trained to teach ever-changing curricula. USAID officials second this, noting that there are problems with in-service teacher training programs to improve teachers' skills, the inadequate coverage of the current curriculum, and a lack of

accountability across the entire system. According to USAID, there is also a lack of qualified teachers, especially in math and science, delays in delivery of teaching materials to schools, and poor maintenance and cleanliness of schools.

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GOVERNMENT WILL PROPOSE SOLUTIONS; TOO LATE FOR MANY  
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¶8. (SBU) Motshekga told the public her ministry will aim to improve the quality of teaching, especially in science, and reduce some of the administrative burden on teachers. She has instructed her department to compile a plan by March to reverse the decline in grades. Since schools will already have been open since January, it is not clear how effective the plan will be in the short term. Motshekga also noted that a teacher development branch of the education department had recently been established to help improve teaching skills, but any teachers found guilty of dereliction of duty would be fired. Some provinces also seem to be taking some initiative, with lessons being offered to pupils on Saturdays and holidays to help teachers complete the curriculum.

¶9. (SBU) Motshekga's plans come too late for new university entrants as plummeting confidence in the test, along with the government's tardiness in releasing the results, are forcing universities to introduce their own assessments for entry. An unnamed senior academic and university administrator told the press that in three to four years, South Africa will have to develop a new system, as universities no longer have confidence in the matric exams. Many institutions are getting first year students to take "benchmark tests" to show their weaknesses and strengths, but passing these tests has become an unspoken criterion for admission.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (SBU) South Africa's education system should be seen in historical perspective; the ANC inherited a school system with deep flaws that during the apartheid era purposefully provided black South Africans an inferior education. In addition to curricula and management problems, schools are negatively affected by societal problems such as weak infrastructure, poverty, lack of qualified personnel, and the

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scourge of HIV/AIDS. The Ministry of Education can only address educational deficiencies, including improving the curricula and the matric, and create equal access to education for everyone.

¶11. (SBU) To expect all of the obstacles to be overcome after only 15 years of democracy would be unrealistic. The SAG has raised education spending almost four-fold since the end of apartheid in 1994 and the ANC continues to call education a priority. Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan has set aside almost \$20 million dollars, or 17 percent of the budget, for education over the next year. Unfortunately, until more of the deeper systemic problems are resolved, the low pass rates, especially in math and science, combined with high drop-out rates, will undoubtedly contribute to South Africa's critical skills shortage, feed its 24 percent unemployment rate, and thwart efforts to boost its economy.

GIPS